

WORDS EMBEDDED IN MUSIC
A MUSICAL APPROACH TO SOME REPRESENTATIVE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERARY TEXTS

THESES

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The aim of my dissertation is to reveal the musical aspects of several representative literary works, including James Joyce's "Sirens" episode from *Ulysses*, Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, Anthony Burgess's *Napoleon Symphony* and *A Clockwork Orange*, and Richard Powers's *The Gold Bug Variations*. The research is not restricted to narratives; poetry is represented by T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in an analysis demonstrating how musical leitmotiv works in a literary text. The target texts are analysed from two perspectives: structural and semantic.

There are many structural elements of music which have a counterpart in literature. The largest element is musical form, including the sonata form, the fugue, and the rondo. Many writers and poets experimented with these established musical forms, using them as the structure of their literary works. Beyond trying to follow the musical pattern, such as the internal structure of various movements, these authors also tried to include other aspects of that certain form. Similarly to a symphony or a sonata, where in most cases the slow movement is followed by a quick one, the tempo of different chapters, or the tempo within a chapter can also vary. Apart from musical form structural elements may include various techniques, like the counterpoint and the leitmotiv, which are frequently used in literature.

Such structural experiments affect the meaning of the text, too. There are some musical devices within a form which can be transposed to literature on the semantic level as well. For instance, the variations enable authors to relate several variants of the same story. Another musical device, the counterpoint, is based on contrasting themes. The leitmotiv also refers to an aspect of meaning; by its reappearance it makes the reader remember earlier situations, resulting in a kind of simultaneity taking place in the reader's mind. The main objective of the writers resorting to the fugal form is to find a way to express simultaneity. Beyond the effect that a musical device produces on meaning the musical content should not

be neglected. A musical composition and – strange as it may sound – even musical forms can have a referential content. This semantic element of music affects the interpretation of the text. The thesis concentrates on musical compositions created by Johann Sebastian Bach and Ludwig van Beethoven. Since these works originate from two different periods, it can be assumed that they were applied by the authors with various purposes. If we go deeper into the compositions described in *Point Counter Point*, *The Gold Bug Variations* and some representative novels by Burgess, we will find some connections between Bach's music and science in Powers's novel, we will understand why Burgess had to invoke Prometheus in *Napoleon Symphony*, moreover, we may also discover whether Beethoven's music can be related in any ways to the behaviour of Alex, the rebellious youngster of *A Clockwork Orange*, or to Spandrell's suicide in Huxley's novel.

In the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses* Joyce exploited the possibilities inherent in both the structural and semantic elements of music. He turned to polyphonic music for methods to express simultaneity, while also considering the semantic content of a musical form. Although the exact form of the episode is still debated, most critics agree that it is polyphonic writing. Considering authorial intentions, Joyce meant to write a *fuga per canonem*: a musical term which might have attracted the writer because of its sound and the inherent semantic possibilities. Since the characteristics of the musical chapter point towards the main attributes of the fugue, it might mean that Joyce believed the two terms to be interchangeable, or at least very similar in meaning. In the "Sirens" episode the most characteristic features of the fugue are applied, as well as the semantic content of the term *fuga per canonem*. Two activities, that is, speaking (or singing) and moving, are inherent in the meaning of *fuga per canonem*. In the episode most characters are speaking or singing, like the performers of a canon, while there is a constant movement going on in the background, which can be related to the meaning of the *fuga*. Although the "Sirens" episode shows mostly the attributes of the fugue, the canon as a

musical composition should also be taken into consideration. It is similar to the fugue in that it is also contrapuntal, but in a canon the voices imitate each other in a quite strict manner, and they do not leave space for freely devised material. The latter attribute makes the fugue more comparable to the “Sirens” episode, where not only the theme of desire is heard, but other, freely devised material is also included. Joyce’s use of *fuga per canonem* implies that apart from analysing the musical structure of “Sirens” one should also take into consideration the meaning inherent in the name of the musical form.

The meaning of a musical form is the most revealing in Huxley’s *Point Counter Point*. The retrograde canon does not only affect the structure of descriptions, that is, presenting the same process from two directions, but the meaning inherent in its Latin name, *cancrizans* refers also to Bidlake’s illness.¹ On the other hand, Huxley’s experiment with musical form on a larger scale seems to be less successful. In *Point Counter Point* he resorted to a musical compositional device in order to provide a structural frame for his vast material, including a great number of characters and themes. There are too many voices of equal value to meet the requirements of any musical form, which means that the juxtaposition of the themes cannot be compared to the traditional fugue: they are rather contrasts than counterpoints. Still, Huxley managed to achieve some kind of simultaneity in the reader’s mind by treating the same theme in various ways.

Apart from the fugal structure, Joyce made use of the leitmotiv technique, too. At the beginning of his musical chapter he presents the main motifs of the following part, which keep reappearing during the whole chapter. These motifs are connected to the voices, contributing to the extension of the spatial aspect of the novel. Joyce’s greatest achievement is that he could convey simultaneity by applying a polyphonic structure and he could also make use of the possibilities inherent in the leitmotiv technique: in both cases the synthesis happens

¹ Ákos I. Farkas, “Canon and Canonicity in Huxley’s *Point Counter Point*”, in *Publicationes Universitatis Miskolcensis*, Sectio Philosophica 15.2 (2010), 124.

in the reader's mind. Probably the best musical analogy for Joyce's technique is provided by Werner Wolf, who compares it to "fragmented polyphony" where "one continuous melody (similar to the one ongoing text) repeatedly creates the impression of polyphony".² This technique is more comparable to the linear reading process and the imaginary simultaneity. There are numerous other musical aspects inherent in Joyce's works, from verbal polyphony, where a single word contains several references, to the semantic aspects of the hundreds of musical allusions, but my study focusses on musical forms and their meaning within the "Sirens" chapter.

T. S. Eliot, beyond using several recurring themes as leitmotifs, borrowed instances of musical leitmotiv from Wagner's opera, *Tristan und Isolde*. The melody of these lines does not appear in the poem, only the lines from the opera attached to these well-known musical fragments, recalling various situations in the listeners' minds, and further, in those readers' minds who are familiar with the opera.

Although the first prominent experiments with musical writing are related to modernism, it had a great impact on the works of contemporary authors as well. Among them the most noteworthy is Anthony Burgess, who went farthest with musico-literary experimentation. Music is present in some form or other in all of his narratives; however, musical analogies are the most apparent in *Napoleon Symphony* and *Mozart and the Wolf Gang*. In these novels Burgess is more concerned with pure structure and musical analogies on smaller levels than with imaginary content analogies. Musical structure as an ordering principle connects him to his modernist predecessors,³ whose experiments he considers unsuccessful in "The Epistle to the Reader" of *Napoleon Symphony*.

² Werner Wolf, *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), 21.

³ Bényei Tamás, *Az ártatlan ország: Az angol regény 1945 után* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2005), 478.

The dissertation discusses in detail the structural analogies between *Napoleon Symphony* and Beethoven's *Eroica*. Beyond the major formal attributes Burgess took into consideration such musical features as tempo, key, or melody. His endeavour to express musical simultaneity in literature is remarkable. His fugato passage, with the three simultaneous voices sounding the same theme comes very close to a three-voiced fugue. On the other hand, Burgess also followed the content of Beethoven's music, bending his narrative according to the symphony, invoking the mythical character of Prometheus at the point where the music from *Creatures of Prometheus* appears in the composition. Semantic analogies can also be found between Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy". Beyond the concept of freedom inherent in the latter, the effect of music on the main character, Alex is also essential. The main idea of the novel is the celebration of free will, which can be related to the last part of Beethoven's symphony. But, as we learn it from a latter novel by Burgess, *The Clockwork Testament*: art is neutral, it cannot be made responsible for its effects on different people. The "Ode to Joy" induced Alex to commit criminal deeds, but he did them by his own free will.

The effect of Beethoven's music has a dominant role in *Point Counter Point*, too. The alternation of meditative and lively parts in *Heiliger Dankgesang* can be connected to Spandrell and Rampion, this way Beethoven's music adds to the description of their characters and world views. Bach's music appears at the beginning of the novel: the narrative potentialities of this music are presented by the author-narrator. Although Huxley's aim was to make use of musical counterpoint, his novel is more a reservoir of a variety of contrasting themes and characters. His greatest achievements are his descriptions of musical content analogies and relating them to characters. *Point Counter Point* cannot be compared to any specific musical form; still, music is a structural element, since two compositions frame the novel.

Richard Powers built his novel upon the structure of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Bach's composition does not contain variations in the strict sense. The thirty pieces have quite different melodies, they are linked only by their bass line and chord progression. Similarly, the structure of Power's novel cannot be related to variations. The name of the musical form refers to the structure of the genetic code. The novel might also be interpreted as the variation of other, literary (Poe's "The Gold-Bug") or non-literary texts (Bach's *Goldberg Variations*), all of them related to a scientific code.

All these literary examples resort to strictly structured classical music: to old forms such as the fugue and the sonata form, or to compositions written according to classical compositional rules. Besides the structural elements, the authors of musicalized texts were also sensitive to the various semantic possibilities, which can be hidden in the form or in the narrative, the descriptive content or the characterizing effect of music. On the other hand, some aspects of these musicalized texts are also comparable to modern music. Schönberg's atonality can be related to the spatial aspect of the voices in the "Sirens" episode. The new system, freeing music from its tonal confines, makes the re-combination of elements possible. Similarly, a text can also be interpreted in terms of linguistic structures, where the elements can be re-combined again and again. The interpretation of literary elements can be also related to another feature of modern music, namely, polymodality, found mainly in Bartók's compositions. In this case the register of each voice appearing in the text can be corresponded to a different key, thus their simultaneous presence results not only in polyphony, but in polymodality as well.

Publications and conferences related to the theme of the dissertation

Publications:

“Fugal Counterpoint or Semantic Contrast? – A Musical Analysis of James Joyce’s “Sirens” and Aldous Huxley’s *Point Counter Point*”. In *HUSSE 10 – LitCult: Proceeding of the HUSSE10 Conference*, ed. Kinga Földváry, Zsolt Almási, and Veronika Schandl. Piliscsaba: Pázmány Péter Catholic University, 2011, 118-125. <http://mek.oszk.hu/10100/10171/>

“Musical Structure and Space in the Modern English Novel”. In *Gateways to English: Current Hungarian Doctoral Research*, ed. Tibor Frank and Krisztina Károly. Budapest: Eötvös Kiadó, 2010, 113-126.

“The Musical Structure of *Napoleon Symphony*”. In *Anthony Burgess: Music in Literature and Literature in Music*, ed. Marc Jeannin. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, 119-128.

“Musical Form and Space in the ‘Sirens’ Episode of *Ulysses*”. *AngolPark*, 2009. <http://seas3.elte.hu/angolpark/index2HU.htm>.

“Prelúdium és fuga B(urgess)-dúrban, avagy a zene Anthony Burgess regényeiben” (“Prelude and fugue in B(urgess) major: music in Anthony Burgess’s novels”). In *Nagyvilág – Világirodalmi folyóirat* 53.12 (2008): 1394-1414.

Conferences:

2011: HUSSE (Hungarian Society for the Study of English) Conference. PPKE, Piliscsaba (“Words Embedded in Music: Some Cases of Covert Intermediality”)

2008: *New Concepts and Approaches in English and American Studies*, Ph.D. Conference. ELTE, Budapest (“Musical Structure and Space in the Modern English Novel”)

2006: *Anthony Burgess: Music in Literature and Literature in Music*, 3rd International Symposium on Anthony Burgess. Anthony Burgess Centre, CRILA, University of Angers, France (“The Musical Structure of *Napoleon Symphony*”)